A political society is more than just a system for integrating unequal organisms (though it is that); it is a system that allows organisms to strive for inequality…

Lionel Tiger & Robin Fox, *The Imperial Animal*[1]

There is no end to history, no ultimate primacy, no necessary continued progress, for the unintended consequences of human action constantly create new interstitial problems, plural outcomes are always possible, and human beings have the capacity to choose well or badly, for good or ill…

Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*[2]

FINESSING PRIMACY –
Some military considerations before subversion does us in

The aim of this article is to tackle how, and why, international competition as Washington currently conceives it is more likely to undermine than assist American primacy in the 21st century.

There are five overarching elements to my argument:

1) humans are competitive – this is not going to change
2) U.S. primacy will prove increasingly difficult to maintain through traditional military and economic means
3) subversion represents a clear and growing danger
4) to thwart subversion the U.S. will need to adopt more than just counter-measures
5) among other courses of action, the U.S. should consider shifting the terms of competition altogether – while it still can

The end of WWII ushered in an entirely new era, and not just thanks to the advent of nuclear weapons. For the first time since the invention of agriculture, wars of conquest were no longer allowed. The Allied victory in WWII killed what had been an age-old war aim: the overt subjugation of other populations. One effect has been to turn warfare inside out. If, for instance, it is no longer possible to subjugate or put others *to* use, then they might as well be considered of no use. Why not dispose of or destroy them instead?[3] We have seen just such actions time and again in the guise of ethnic and religious cleansing. But more germane to what should concern Washington is that the idea of destruction – not conquest – now lurks beneath the surface of Great Power contestation.

Washington needs to beware. Unprovoked, Americans are not animated by the desire to destroy; we tend to be optimists and believe we can get others to come around; we seldom consider opponents to be irredeemable.[4] But this is not how others see us, and a major motivator for some (if not all) adversaries will be to undo the U.S.[5]

Especially worrisome is the fact that because we Americans are constitutionally wired to mirror-image – and to look at others and see ourselves – we are also predisposed to believe that others are ambitious to acquire primacy in the same ways we acquired it, and thus they will more or less abide by the same

rules. However, in making this assumption, we miss more sinister motives. We also fail to recognize how much more can be done through subversion and other dark arts today than at any time previously.

As I hope to make clear, competition under post-conquest circumstances creates a host of problems. Not only is it much easier to subvert, undermine, and ultimately destroy than it is to control, but the means by which adversaries can inflict crippling damage have never been more promising, widespread, or accessible – from bio- and cyber-hacking and cybotage, to the printing of 3-D weapons, to what can be done with misinformation and disinformation, to the ease with which social movements can be hijacked.[6]

One conclusion I reach is that given the plethora of methods that state and non-state actors have at their disposal, it is short-sighted (and even dangerous) for policy makers and national security intellectuals to openly declare Washington's intent to outcompete and contain near peers. At a minimum, policy makers should talk much more softly if at all about how they intend for the U.S. to out-do others. At the same time, decision makers should talk far more loudly about – and should begin to devise – a far more complete array of counter-measures. And then, because ***counter*ing** anything cedes the initiative to others and is ***re***-active rather than pro-active, Washington should also consider how the U.S. might adopt new approaches to deflect competition to new, safer arenas.

Because the gist of this article tilts at current conventional wisdom, let me begin with what makes It most different. My starting premise is that competition – not status – is the driver we should be most concerned about.[7] I accept as a given that some individuals have a greater urge to compete than do others, and that some countries or peoples, shaped by this, are wired for primacy as well: they would seek primacy by whatever means are available, and those who are most ambitious will often seek it across the board.

Without question, acquiring status, seeking recognition, reveling in homage, and enjoying deference matter to ambitious individuals and countries. But, for whatever psycho-socio-historical set of reasons, the act of competing matters more. The need to best others amounts to an addiction. For those seeking primacy, adulation, like fame, is an ancillary reward. Ambitious individuals might believe prominence is what motivates them. But this does not account for why they pursue primacy, which is prominence maximized.[8]

According to the way in which I am using 'primacy,' the quest for primacy animates people (or countries) to *want* to dominate. It drives them to want to attain a position by which they can influence, impel, compel, sit atop, or control others *without anyone being able to do the same to them*. Frequently, individuals and countries start down this road because they seek autonomy; achieving primacy often begins defensively. But, since one actor's defense becomes another's offense… competition over primacy can lead to primacy itself becoming the goal.

Nor is primacy just a synonym for power. The syllogism that best summarizes the difference between the quest for power and the quest for primacy is: power is to primacy as competition is to *being* #1.[9]

For those who seek primacy, reaching the apex matters. Another way to think about primacy is as prominence propelled by the need to prove superiority (with emphasis on the word 'prove').

Meanwhile, the flip side of someone (or some country) reaching the top is that their being *at* the top fuels others to want to see them toppled, removed, or gone. I want to be careful here, ergo I use the

word ‘others’ rather than just ‘rivals’ or ‘competitors.’ Without question, competition is predicated on rivalry, and rivalry between near peers is integral to competition, but rivals are never the only parties who want to see the mighty fall. There are always others who, for a multitude of reasons, aim to bring down those who sit atop the commanding heights.

This describes the U.S.’s predicament today. It is also why, despite current alarm about a rising China and the ease with which many China-watchers then dismiss our need to worry about lesser states (like Russia, Iran, or North Korea), they are wrong to be so dismissive.[10]

*** * ***

In the first section of this article, I diagnose three sets of inter-related challenges: 1) the impetus to compete, and what this implies; 2) complications caused by the fact that today’s wars are fought in the name of ‘liberation’ rather than conquest; and 3) the ease with which 21st century subversion can be achieved. In section two, I explore avenues of redress: how might the U.S. thwart subversion? What are the pros and cons of engaging in subversion ourselves? Are there new (or renewable) ways in which our military can be used? (and here I pay particular attention to the much-ballyhooed idea of proxy warfare). As food for thought, I also suggest what the U.S. might do to shift the terms of competition altogether before I briefly recap the overall argument.

I. DIAGNOSING THE CHALLENGE

The impetus to compete

We are imperial animals

Truism #1 is that we humans are wired to compete, some more so than others. Throughout the ages, humans have competed by means of warfare, poetry, monumental architecture, and a wide range of other measures. Typically, we do so in mixed and matched ways. At the same time, the exact nature by which ambitious individuals strive to be first, fastest, richest, or you-name-it continually evolves, so that what something like clipper ships were to the 19th century we could say space travel has become in the 21st: a cutting edge means by which to secure speed and distance records, wealth, acclaim, fame, and a host of other prizes. Except – the chase for the next means by which to 'win' never really ends, and for those for whom primacy is the prize there is no resting on laurels. With no finality to the contest, they have to *keep* trying to beat others. Also, so long as technology continues to advance, new discoveries and efficiencies simply ratchet up the tempo of the competition.

A **second truism** is that it is fierce competitors and their followers who set the tone for what competition can/should/should not consist of. To be sure, custom, institutions, and ethical concerns play constraining roles. This is something we see especially vividly with rules of engagement in warfare, along with offense/defense cycles, the evolution of weaponry, arms races, and so on. Rivalry typically leads to the development of congruence between opponents over time, and often an unspoken consensus develops regarding what is or is not considered immoral or unacceptable by both sides.

Great Power rivalries have also helped determine how smaller powers behave. For instance, there is no discernible reason why militaries should resemble one another as closely as they do, as if formations in the Zambian army might confront the same adversaries that Chileans or South Koreans will. But all armies have ended up being similarly structured. The same goes for lots of institutions. Numerous political scientists would doubtless attribute much of this modeling and mimicry to status-seeking. And, like all social animals, we humans *are* status-seeking. However, it is the most ambitious among us who drive contestation.

The most ambitious among us are consumed by the pursuit of primacy – this represents a **third truism**, the corollary to which is that once the ambitious attain primacy they then do everything in their power to retain it. The most straightforward means by which to do so and to ensure that others cannot knock them off their perch is to get others to follow as closely in their footsteps as possible. By being first, by having 'been there, done that' ahead of everyone else, those who achieve primacy presumably know exactly how to block or divert others. Or, to continue with the path metaphor: one great advantage to attaining the commanding heights is that this should grant those occupying the high ground a wider and more all-knowing (or at least all-seeing) perspective than anyone else can attain.

However, despite the importance of preventing others from rising to those some heights, trying to stymie them through blocking actions – as in, "no, you are not going to push us off the mountain top" – hardly suffices. Not when others can use alternative means to land themselves right beside you, and not when they can drill into and do whatever else they can think of to hollow out or cut the mountain itself down to size.[11]

This brings me to a **fourth truism**. Historically speaking, the most obvious path upward may have been to outdo others in whatever contest was already underway. If, for instance, we think back to the latter

half of the 19th century, the contest was imperial; aspiring powers sought colonies, and acquired them by treaty and/or through force. Throughout much of the 20th century, the contest still involved the use, and not just the display, of force. Arguably, force will continue to matter in the future, though one question this article poses is: to what extent *will* military force remain the sine qua non of primacy if we continue to refuse to use military power in the ways in which it was designed to be used? The second question I grapple with more directly is: when those who seek to do something *about* and *to* us prefer to use non-military methods instead, then what?

Again, the premise of this article is that at least some of our adversaries are more intent on bringing us down than they are in elevating themselves, while what makes this so perilous is that they do not have to follow in our footsteps or try to win over anyone else in order to do so.

The idea that others would want to cut us down to size might perplex numerous Americans. It will especially flummox those who believe the U.S. has been the greatest force for good the world has ever known. However, we need to remember that as true as that latter conviction may be, assertions about the harm we have done can be equally true. And it is this second set of perspectives we need to worry about.

As for when the U.S. first attained primacy, let us say this occurred sometime during World War II and was consolidated through agreements like Bretton Woods and the establishment of organizations like NATO. Throughout the Cold War, the U.S. did not just make itself indispensable for security, but for prosperity as well. The rules that Washington helped orchestrate set the contours of global order, even for countries outside the 'free world.'. Indeed, so successful were Washington's efforts that by the late 20th century, the U.S. had knocked its most formidable near peer competitor (the USSR) out of the ring.

A cogent argument can also be made that while the order the U.S. helped orchestrate benefited everyone, the nature of the security/prosperity bargain was such that while others did well, we always did better. Ergo the catchphrase, *first* among equals. Then, as the specter of nuclear war and the threat of a Soviet invasion receded in the early 1990s, as Washington directed more of its primacy-related activities toward lesser (and less compelling-seeming) threats, non-Americans and more and more Americans as well found themselves questioning whether the U.S. still merited its first among equals stature.[12] Or so one reading of recent history might suggest.

Of course, regardless of where one comes down on whether the U.S. profited from the post-WWII order more than other countries did, the fact that we Americans managed to be first among putative equals *without* having to actually, literally rule anyone remains an unprecedented feat. No less impressive is that even today we remain first *above* equals.

But herein lies a problem given yet another **(fifth) truism**: the desire by some to establish order and set the rules for everyone else rarely sits well with everyone else. Thus, no matter how lightly we think e are exerting our dominance, dominance eventually grates and leads to resentment.

A second drawback to setting the rules is that rules are really nothing more than conventions. This constitutes a **sixth truism**. Yes, rules keep everyone constrained, but only so long as people want to abide by them and/or so long as those who benefit from them can enforce them. Enforcing norms typically requires either strength in numbers and/or some other means by which to impel and compel others, or both. Ergo the historical importance of military and economic power.

Military and economic power matter because, as Karl Marx noted in the 19th century, anyone who can control the means of production could control lots of other things as well. What Marx did not emphasize, though Jack Goody (anthropologist) did, is that if you can acquire the means of destruction that is even better; then you can tax or otherwise *seize* the means of production.[13] Though of course better still is to control the *production* of the means of destruction since then you can control it all.

Actually, nothing better illustrates the power that inheres in controlling the means of *producing* the means of destruction than nuclear non-proliferation (NPT). As we know, nuclear weapons are horrifically destructive. But this is exactly what makes them so alluring. Their lethality helps explain why so many states and non-state actors want them, and why those who have them do everything in their power to prevent others from acquiring them. The NPT represents a quasi-voluntary means by which to limit the number of countries with nuclear weapons wherewithal. Other methods of restricting access include preventing people from acquiring the materiel, the know-how, or the equipment needed to build and/or deliver warheads. Not surprisingly, one effect of controls like these has been to turn the manufacture of nuclear weapons into the alpha and omega *of* military primacy: having nukes is both evidence of, and evidence for, who *gets* to set the rules, thereby goading some countries to endure any number of privations in order to join a club that doesn't want them.[14]

How curious, then, that not all countries have followed suit. In fact, lots of countries do not seem the least bit interested in acquiring or manufacturing nuclear weapons, which is a reality that should introduce a small wrinkle into the supposition that all humans are relentlessly status-hungry and competitive. Status-oriented, maybe. Driven to compete over the same things – not necessarily.[15]

Cross-*cultural* primacy – a potential finesse?

Interestingly, if we examine the quest for primacy cross-culturally we find quite a bit of variation and can even find it in the same country over time. For instance, consider Japan's modern quest for primacy. Certain figures in Japan promoted militarism well before WWII. They did so, in part, because military power was *the* cross-cultural metric by which to prove global worth and standing at the time, a dynamic that helps (though does not wholly) explain Japan's imperial ambitions. But then, once Japan was militarily crushed and decisively defeated in WW II, what happened to Japan's imperial ambitions? They vanished. Not only did the Japanese find themselves having to retool in the war's aftermath, but the message they received seemed clear: acquiring status by military means *did not* play to Japan's strengths. Perhaps something else would. Much of the world had to rebuild after WWII. Queue rebuilding.

In an almost perverse re-reversal of fortunes, it turns out that Japan excelled at re-industrialization, at trade and, over time, at quality control. Indeed, Japan did so well at re-tooling itself (with American assistance) that, by the 1980s, Americans and others considered Japan *the* economic juggernaut to be reckoned with.[16] Witness 'Japan Inc.' The whole world became enamored of Japanese methods.

However, once Japan's economy started sputtering in the early 1990s, and then seriously stagnated – at least relative to others, 'relative to others' being the sine non qua of competition – Tokyo stopped vying for Japan to be #1. Why? Was this a conscious change of course or merely coincidental? Or could Japan's self-restraint represent something else?

I pose this last question because whenever a formerly fierce competitor applies the brakes and switches gears, it should give us pause. Maybe more can be done to curb or re-orient competitive urges than we realize, which is one of the ideas this article plays with.

For instance, the British traveled down a path similar to Japan's. In the wake of WWII, Winston Churchill might not have thought the British empire was a thing of the past, but most members of Britain's ruling class did. Then, along came the 1956 Suez debacle and stronger-blowing winds of change. Before long, the British found themselves only really able to maintain Great Power stature in a few select areas: education, intelligence, finance, and certain socio-cultural/Anglophone realms they had long excelled in, like literature and acting. Arguably, we Americans made this easier for the English by being such willing Romans to their cultured Greekness. But curiously, the Japanese weren't the least bit like us. Yet, they too successfully transitioned. Again, how so?

In Japan's case, it appears to have been their difference from us – not similarity – along with timing that helped. Thanks to a series of post-war developments (like more extensive trade, cheaper travel, more spending power on the part of an expanding middle class), increasing numbers of Westerners found themselves exposed to aspects of Japanese culture they had never previously encountered. Certainly, Japan's economic ascent helped boost interest in Japanese cuisine, Japanese design, the 'power' of Zen, and so on, but Japanese craftsmanship and style were also quite unique. Better yet, no one, ever, was going to be able to outdo the Japanese when it came to perfecting their techniques. Thus, excelling at doing Japanese things was always going to remain in Japanese hands. In fact, it has been no more possible to successfully appropriate Japaneseness or outdo the Japanese at being Japanese than non-British English-speakers have managed to wrest English language primacy away from the British.[17]

I bring up these two examples because they highlight the usefulness of cultural distinctiveness and they suggest the extent to which cultural primacy might be used to take some of the sting out of no longer being able to be a military or economic #1. Also, as different as the Japanese and English examples are, they suggest that culture might offer the ideal finesse for cross-cultural competition. For instance, imagine if everyone could achieve primacy in venues unique to them. Then everyone would have reason to feel special in others' eyes. Just consider what excelling at *being* Japanese has permitted the Japanese to do: reassure themselves that they *are* superior.[18] The French might object: sure, the Japanese excel at raw fish and rice, or saki and floral arrangements, but they (the French) represent real haute-ness – with haute couture, haute cuisine, and centuries of gloire behind them. In this kind of competitive round robin, the Italians would doubtless disagree with the French, Spaniards would disagree with Italians, and so it would go. With one-upmanship confined to style, art, taste, or even prior Golden Age glory, there are no *definitive* heights for anyone *to* command. Nor can there be clear-cut winners or losers since the contest is hardly zero-sum; proofs of (or for) aesthetic superiority do not exist. In theory this means that primacy in cultural matters *should* both enable and dampen competition, which would make it the ideal foil.[19] Except – 'should' is not very realistic.

While cultural primacy might seem ideal for deflecting international competition into non-destructive venues, highlighting aesthetic, historic, and/or cultural accomplishments will never satisfy those who need to have lasting primacy *over,* rather than just primacy *in*. Or, to put this in somewhat different terms, just because the Swiss, the Dutch, Norwegians, Finns and members of numerous small(er) nations already seem at peace with who and what (or where) they are and how they are regarded, this hardly describes us, or the Russians, Chinese, Iranians, Islamists, or others.
If we were to dig deeper, we no doubt would discover a myriad of factors that have a self-reinforcing dampening or amplifying effect on people's *need* to act or be assertive. But regardless of whether gentility is best regarded as a 'culture and personality' trait or a by-product of a country's history, size, and location, **a seventh truism** is that *not* needing to dominate is of little interest to those interested in dominance.

For instance, no matter how attractive a quality gentility might be, few ambitious people in countries where striving is valued – as it is in the U.S. – care about how citizens in genteel countries view them. American members of the globe-trotting elite might act as though they care what urbane others think because they rub shoulders with them at Davos, in Aspen, and elsewhere, but for those whose ambition is to be #1, gentility is little more than a means, maybe. Or, to rephrase this, so long as the path to dominance is best achieved by being domineering – by being ruthless and assertive or by out-producing and out-performing others in demonstrable ways – why be humble?

Not only has humility never historically served America's purpose, but humility has never been cited by us or by others as one of our defining traits. On the contrary, our urge to be #1 has deep cultural, religious, historic, economic, geo-political, and pragmatic roots.[20] If we acknowledge that this urge remains an animating force for numerous Americans, the issue becomes: how might the U.S. retain sufficient dominance and rule-setting primacy to satisfy those for whom this *is* a driver while also ensuring that we do not end up being out-competed or undone by others who seek the same?[21] Here it might seem as though I am alluding to China, but we cannot forget a host of other actors, especially since plenty of people today would like to do us in ***in order to*** *show us up*.

Nor am I am just obliquely referring to jihadis. The U.S. military has been expeditionary for well over a century. U.S. commercial interests have impacted other countries' political economies for at least that long. One consequence is that we Americans have wittingly and unwittingly upended lots of people's lives, to include people for whom exacting revenge is morally obligatory. This means that we have numerous detractors who would like to see us taken down a peg or two just because, and others who would like to see us punished for a long list of sins.

There is always a price to be paid for being #1.

The desire to hurt and/or humble the U.S. represents the ugly underside of competition. More to the point, opponents who are motivated by resentment, vengefulness, or even just *schadenfrude* are not the type to care about besting us through direct competition. Instead, their version of "I'll show you" is grounded in comeuppance. This means that no matter how much we should worry about near peers, we should equally worry about non-near peers. In some cases, the desire to up-end us will inspire the same kinds of acts that one-upping us does. But the fact that not everyone seeks primacy for themselves means that adversaries in the 21st century are not at all like the WWI, WWII, or Cold War-era competitors Washington built itself and our military to beat.[22]

Liberation – the post-conquest complication

Up through World War II, a fairly straightforward set of benchmarks determined who belonged where in the global pecking order: there were people(s) who had no interest in conquest; those who were able to conquer people right around them; those who successfully assembled empires; and those who successfully wrested empires away. In contrast, Great Powers today stand to lose more by trying to conquer or subjugate a foreign population than they do by aggrandizing via other means.[23]

Since the end of WWII, war has been waged on behalf of 'liberation' and, at least rhetorically, aims to help free people from foreign domination and/or tyrannical rule. One of the Second World War's most signal accomplishments was to sound the death knell for empire and conquest, particularly if one considers what the Nazis and the Japanese tried to achieve and the extent to which their defeat wasn't just their defeat. Instead, for the first time since the advent of organized force, the Allied victory in WWII signaled that governments were no longer free to use their militaries to take over other people's territory in the same forceful ways they had in the past.

Through the mid-1950s, the Soviets and Chinese did still get away with occupation (or re-occupation) in their near-abroads in places like Tibet, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. Some would contend that this is what Moscow is trying to do today with Ukraine (or the Chinese intend to do with Taiwan). But few countries have pulled off successful territorial aggrandizement and, in all cases, have been condemned and penalized for doing so: e.g., Israel with the 'occupied territories' or, worse, Iraq vis a vis Kuwait. Generally, anything smacking of occupation has also created all manner of problems for the occupiers.[24]

But liberation as a concept has also been stretched in other directions. For instance, thanks to the post-conquest rubric of not being able to put people to use, thereby rendering them of no use, minority populations have often been treated as fair game and pillaged before they are sent fleeing, especially if they can be said to pose (or have posed) a political threat to the regime. In a literal sense, then, liberation has been used both to justify the displacement of populations and the liberation of their property.

At the same time that ethnic and religious cleansing has occurred under the guise of liberation in places like Bosnia, Darfur, Burma, and elsewhere, liberation has also been used to justify irredentism and the re-absorption of co-ethnics (case in point: *Russian* Crimea). Nor does the impulse to 'free the oppressed,' which happens to be the motto of U.S. Army Special Forces, only inspire those seeking re-unification into a Greater Somalia, Greater Israel, or a resurgent Russia and re-unified China; liberation also motivates those seeking autonomy, and, as ever, it inspires humanitarians.

Meanwhile, although the idea of helping others emancipate themselves is hardly new, liberation does pose a series of mounting problems for Western militaries. We might even go so far as to say that since Western militaries have been freed from the rigors of conquest, they have actually found warfare more difficult to wage. This has been especially true for the expeditionary U.S. military.

Traps of our own making

Consider just eight interlocking difficulties:

1) The U.S. possesses an unparalleled conventional arsenal. U.S. forces can pulverize whomever they choose to target. But for the same reasons that Washington desists from using nuclear weapons – because they are too devastating – Washington likewise pulls the military's conventional punches;

conventional means are considered insufficiently discriminating. The kicker to this, however, is that because the U.S. possesses such an overwhelming conventional arsenal – one designed to decimate adversaries – next to no one fights us (or our allies) this way.[25] Instead, they wage war from 'amongst the people,' which is what then causes Washington to try to be discriminating.

2) Because the U.S. cannot afford to jeopardize the people it is bent on liberating – since that would be antithetical to liberating them – adversaries purposely burrow in. This is how we get war 'amongst the people.' Yet, because we then cannot (or rather, do not) use our conventional advantage *to* advantage, the asymmetry that should most advantage us – overwhelming force – advantages our opponents instead.

3) We *think* we possess a workaround for neutralizing opponents who burrow into civilian populations via precision strike and F3EAD.[26] However, the expectations that we create by trying to be discriminating and precise set us up for catastrophic information operations (IO) failures whenever our targeting is imprecise or goes awry. We also set our adversaries up to bait us into *causing* civilian casualties. Then, thanks to the internet, our blunders live on forever and, worse, can be recalled anyone at any time.

4) Precision strike and F3EAD certainly *seem* sophisticated. Both play to our love of speed and continuous technical improvement. But the problem with both is that they are hopelessly ***re***active. *We* watch and wait. We might *try* to get adversaries to expose themselves, but we never purposely entrap them; we do not engage in strategic ambushes.[27] Instead, we put ourselves in the position of playing endless catch up.

5) Also, because we seek to liberate, we cannot wreak destruction and then just walk away; we cannot hit, cut, and run. We feel duty-bound to help rebuild. However, as soon as we involve ourselves in any kind of reconstruction efforts (to include institution-building), we embroil ourselves in local politics. Whether we realize it or not, embroiling ourselves in local politics guarantees resistance; we give everyone whose 'business' we disrupt reason to cause us trouble and to want to keep causing us trouble.[28]

6) Our military excels at breaking things and blowing them up, particularly since its center of gravity *is* the combat arms. We Americans are endlessly technologically innovative. However – and fortunately – we do not try to innovate when it comes to what we will do with and to other human beings. This is a good thing, but our adversaries (to include autocratic states) do not share our qualms. They do not hesitate to marry off-the-shelf technology *to* terror. Worse, their willingness to engage in intimidation via savage acts just further cinches us into a straitjacket we have not yet figured out how to escape: we cannot fight *them* the way they fight us, but we also will not fight them in the manner we are most comfortable with and best prepared for – via overwhelming and decisive conventional force.[29]

7) A second asymmetry that we create has to do with physical objectives. Because we engage in liberation rather than conquest, our military no longer seizes objectives with an eye toward controlling populations or terrain. Fighting remains physical, but our objectives no longer are; the U.S. military today is not supposed to unilaterally take or keep anything. Yet, all four of our military services were designed to seize objectives, destroy enemy capabilities, and defeat forces that, once beaten, would then submit.

In previous eras, when the point *was* to exert control, objectives *needed* to be physical; you had to get to, through, and past them in order to finish the job; this was how you knew you were finished and it is

how opponents knew they were finished as well. But, with the aim of warfare having shifted from control to liberation, goals have grown increasingly abstract and inchoate. As imperatives keep shifting they also ensure foreverness.

Among the many detrimental things that occur when wars drag on and U.S. forces get bogged down is that we make mistakes. Drone strikes kill the wrong people; raids backfire; individuals do things they shouldn't. Errors of any type make the U.S. look fallible. Our adversaries, on the other hand, are 'at home.' Either they are literally at home, since we are expeditionary, or they are comfortable with whatever wrongs we might commit given how much they stand to gain from our heavy-handedness, our inadvertent contravention of local mores, even innocent accidents. All such events cost us.

8) With conquest off the table, near peer competitors also know we are not about to try to absorb them militarily. Factor in the magnitude of our arsenal and it makes little sense for any of them to re-produce or even match our same conventional capabilities. Better for them to instead invest in anti-access and denial, or subterfuge and sabotage.[30] Also, because subversion is cheap, easy to experiment with, plausibly deniable when done well, and potentially extremely satisfying to engage in, near peers have no reason not to dabble in it. Nor is it just near peers who will continue to try to find new and different ways to undermine us – not if we take into account how seductive the thought of '*now* America, you'll get yours' can be.

I do not mean to suggest here that traditional military power is moot. Far from it. Other countries will continue to invest in their militaries so that they can throw their weight around their neighborhoods, protect their investments, and control their own population(s). Also, some might be motivated to try to do to us what we did to the Soviets and force us to overspend in certain areas (now that that gambit has been so well publicized). But if you consider just the eight catch-22s described here, it should be clear: unless or until we are able to re-tilt the tables in favor of large-scale conventional war and/or decide to inflict widespread harm by unconventional means ourselves, we are at a distinct disadvantage. Being expeditionary also disadvantages us: every time we operate abroad we will generate resistance, and at least some of those we harm will seek revenge.[31] Again, simply by striving to remain #1, we invite comeuppance. Not only do #1s *always* invite attack, but whoever helps to bring us down will earn permanent bragging rights for having done so.[32]

<u>Additional predicaments</u>

As for a few other realities to bear in mind: none of our near peer competitors want to reside in a world where we set the rules. In fact, the competitors we regard as most threatening – China and Russia -- are near peers because they actively reject our leadership. Nothing we do, short of subverting them, is going to make them want to accede. The same holds for other adversaries, who are adversaries because they have no desire to fall under our sway either, e.g. North Korea, Iran, jihadis, etc.

Or, to further connect the dots:

1) We Americans are not unique in our drive to compete, but our drive to compete does help define us. Because we have an almost insatiable need to be recognized as bigger/stronger/better, we wear a giant bullseye on our backs. We also genuinely believe that our primacy redounds to everyone's benefit. We do not appreciate the extent to which others do not agree with us about that. Instead, we seem to relish the idea of liberating them so that they will see things as we do.

2) One reason we foreswore military conquest is because we consider it inhumane. But, in reality, purposefully undermining other people's systems and thereby delivering them into chaos and/or back into the hands of corrupt leaders (which is what liberation often does) is no more humane. Our track record when it comes to successfully pulling off benificent regime change is not very good; we were seldom successful even during the Cold War. Among the many reasons that regime change has become more difficult is that lengthy campaigns are exceedingly challenging to orchestrate, let alone keep secret. With disagreements now so partisan in Washington, even when all parties agree that *something* needs to be done, they cannot agree on what that something needs to be, let alone for how long they will stay committed to it.

One sees this especially clearly when it comes to foreign policy prescriptions for how to deal with China.[33] Prescriptions range from disentanglement, to closer cooperation, to aggressive containment. Some policy advisers advocate a NATO-like alliance for Asia, while others want us to outcompete the Chinese in all of the realms in which China is making strides, from science and technology, to manufacturing, to space exploration. Yet others would have us go toe to toe with China in all locations where Beijing is growing its presence – from blue water oceans, to inland Africa, to the Panama Canal Zone. Essentially, we should be pressing China everywhere in everything.[34]

But – unless we are *sure* that we can out-compete the Chinese in all of these areas *and* protect ourselves from unrestricted warfare as the Chinese conceive it, how does tit-for-tat competition make sense? Nor should this just be considered a rhetorical question. The Chinese military's notion of unrestricted warfare is considerably more liberal than ours, at least as they describe it in the literature that they make accessible to us. Maybe their descriptions comprise nothing more than a masterful psyop; perhaps Beijing cannot pull off half of what its colonels and other authors imply it can. However, extensive espionage, cyber breaches, and COVID suggest otherwise, which is not to say that China does not have plenty of vulnerabilities of its own, but the topic here is *our* predicament.

This brings me to subversion.

Subversion

Again, the neat – but frightening – thing about subversion in 2021 is that subverting the U.S. does not have to entail physical aggression. Subversion can be accomplished via misinformation, disinformation, or misdirection. Adversaries can bait us into over-reach or they can blackmail our politicians (and/or their relatives). Opponents can also insinuate their way into our businesses, corrupt our media, 'buy' corporate leaders, or just intimate that any or all of this is underway.

Provided that we Americans remain kinetically capable in the 21st century, subverting us will remain smart competitors' dark art of choice.[35] After all, the more we can be made to distrust, dislike, and disdain one another, the more this will preclude us from being able to reach any kind of consensus about how to handle our most pressing domestic concerns, which means they will worsen – to include our ability to figure out how to effectively respond to being torn apart. Also, with smart subversion there is no source *to* respond to – *other than ourselves*. Smart saboteurs simply need to keep us divided over what we *think* is occurring; our now-toxic partisanship will do the rest.

By way of example, consider what the 9/11 hijackers are still managing to accomplish from beyond the grave, and the extent to which the aftereffects of their *non-military* attack continue to rip us apart.[36] For just one of 9/11's bouncing ball effects: FISA court protections were enhanced right after 9/11, and then, 15 years later, with the Patriot Act still in place, an application to the FISA court served as the ideal cover for surveilling then-presidential candidate Donald Trump's election team. The initial probe of Trump's team led to a two-year-long independent prosecutor investigation, which eventually cleared but did not unequivocally exonerate the then-President of the United States. To this day it remains impossible to say whether the initial charges of Trump-Russian collusion were initiated as anything more than a political smear, though the Kremlin did apparently attempt to meddle in the 2016 election – all of which points to the incomparable usefulness of scattering just enough radioactive bread crumbs for over-eager partisans to find.

Indeed, if the aim of subversion is to simply undermine (and not take over or seek to control), then it does not matter *how* our animus plays out. The only thing opponents need to do is to ensure that our mutual distrust festers and intensifies. We see this especially vividly with COVID. Public health responses to COVID have created so much chaos in the U.S. that it is doubtful that public health officials will ever fully regain the public's trust. COVID's novelty, rapid spread, and virulence certainly contributed to the chaos. But so did the absence of anyone in authority would could rise above the fray as *the* voice of consistent, calm reason.[37] The fact that the public's early favorite, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease director Anthony Fauci, was already being excoriated by at least some media outlets within weeks of standing on the podium next to the president, should have set off alarms. If no one in authority merits abiding trust, then what?

Collective national security will unravel if there is no overarching source of credible information all citizens are willing to listen to in a crisis. Without a credible overarching source of information, basic facts wind up subject to ever more spin and counter-spin – or are assumed to *have been* spun, which is an increasingly plausible assumption given the degree to which journalists eschew the need to try to be objective.[38]

Here the salient point is less that we Americans are easy marks than that ***we*** provide adversaries with everything they need to cause us to undermine ourselves. In fact, for anyone who still believes that Vladimir Putin was behind Donald Trump's election as president, imagine how ingenious Putin's choice

turned out to be: Democrats were so incensed by Trump's accession that they serially sought his removal, thereby galvanizing Republicans to back Trump in whatever way they could, to include convincing a significant percentage of the voting public that the integrity of our system had indeed been subverted – but had been subverted *by other Americans,* aka the Deep State.

Eventually, we might discover that the Chinese orchestrated something even more diabolical with COVID (a point I will come back to). But regardless, once provocateurs from anywhere cause enough of us to point fingers at each other, they gain a twofer: the more viciously we Americans go after one another, the more we undermine the U.S. as an exemplar, too.

* * *

Again, to legions of Americans, and maybe even to most of our allies and some adversaries, the U.S. remains #1 gratis our economic and military strength. But to persist in believing that rivals will continue to try to match us strength for strength as they might have done 30 years ago, underestimates how easy we make it for them to throw the contest instead. And political subversion offers just one method. Clever opponents can also show us up technologically. Or, with even less effort, they can skewer us as hypocrites. All three are ideal for puncturing our 'first among equals' conceit. Consequently, I next turn to technology and progress as a problem area, followed by hypocrisy.

<u>Progress and technology – *without* Western characteristics</u>

We Westerners invented the idea of unrelenting forward progress, born of scientific inquiry, a Weberian work ethic, a competitive capitalist spirit, and the Judeo-Christian idea that individuals are society's most significant unit of account. This is not to say that people elsewhere have not also always been improvement-oriented, but we Westerners were the first to fetishize the idea. Modernity and progress – the conviction that everything (and everyone) can and should always be improved – were decidedly Western concepts.[39]

But ironically, it has also been thanks to us and the ways in which the West has long defined 'being modern' that most goods can now be made, and even improved upon, simply by adopting and adapting processes – ***and no one has to Westernize at all***. With culture stripped out of the art of manufacture, non-Westerners have not just proven increasingly adept at splitting what it means to be modern from its Western roots, but are out-pacing us in some areas.

A second way in which modernity and Westernization have been split asunder has to do with appearances, literally – since by definition anything new is more modern than anything old. Or, as a well-traveled young Sierra Leonean once explained to me: London was old and dirty; he rated it a 'has-been.' Shanghai, on the other hand, was modern and gleaming and proved that China was a beacon for the future.

As anyone who has visited Asia can attest, numerous Asian cities now have more cutting-edge parts to them than do most of their Western counterparts.[40] Traveling through Shanghai or Seoul also feels more modern on newer, better transportation systems. Surface impressions make a lasting impression, from nighttime light shows that ripple down the sides of buildings, to ubiquitous Wifi, to the seeming absence of street crime. Or, consider that not long ago the U.S. was home to the world's tallest buildings. New York City and Chicago were famous for them. Today, the U.S. has only two out of the top 15 skyscrapers, and our very tallest building comes in at only #6.

In the face of progress like this, the West would either need to raze its cities and their legacy infrastructure (unlikely) or it will have to come up with a wholly new combination of markers of progress to both capitalize on *and* control if we hope to retain primacy according to what we have long used to herald progress. Alternatively, we will have to redefine modernity altogether and devise new criteria and categories for what is worthy of improvement. If not, we risk being overtaken by the very yardstick we invented: namely, relentless forward progress.

Again, to many Europeans and to at least some Americans, being overtaken might not matter. But to significant numbers of Americans being #1 remains paramount.

Consider: already, the Chinese are said to be ahead in AI, 5G, cloning, etc.[41] The more dependent they can now get other countries to be on whatever advanced technologies they develop, the more they will lock everyone in. This is what we did in the 20th century with airplane manufacturing, for example.[42]

That China can now leapfrog us in numerous STEM fields long considered ours begs a number of questions. First, what happens once they (or others) consistently show us up in the areas that have made us technologically dominant? Second, if we lose the ability to determine which areas these are, what then? Third, if we can no longer control the pace of innovation *or* shape the domains in which we want innovation to occur, shouldn't we instead try to re-cast how (and according to what) progress is measured, and wouldn't it make strategic sense to do so while we still can?

Timing seems critical here, especially since the more others press ahead in fields that we eschew (like cloning or gain of function research), the less redress we will have.[43] One might think that this alone would spur us to want to consider how to shift competition to areas that we *know* we can control – as a backstop if nothing else.

<u>Hypocrisy – a third Achilles heel</u>

If technological progress is no longer ours to control, what about social progress? Until recently, most Americans had reason to feel good about our deomestic progress. Both our affluence and our immigration rates seemed proof positive that with freedom comes opportunity and prosperity. But this conviction appears increasingly shaky. Or, as foreign critics like to point out, if we Americans were the paragons of social progress that we claim to be, the U.S. would have no hungry or abused children, little poverty, next to no crime, and many fewer drug addicts. We also would not warehouse our elderly or have the world's highest incarceration rates. However, even given this common litany, what non-Americans can speak to with still greater authority is how hypocritical we tend to be in the realm of social progress when operating overseas.

For quite some time, the U.S. has been regarded as a questionable ally and an inattentive world leader. We Americans periodically acknowledge this, although we also like to blame our election cycle. With every new administration come policy shifts. Yet, political turnover from one administration to the next cannot account for all the many pivots since the Korean War: from Diem to not Diem; the Shah to not the Shah; Marcos to not Marcos; Mobutu to not Mobutu; Saddam to not Saddam; Qaddafi to not Qaddafi; Mubarak to not Mubarak; Morsi to not Morsi; Karzai to not Karzai – or from the Kurds, away from the Kurds, and back to the Kurds again.

Policy makers might contend that these about-faces have had more to do with our clients than with us: *they* changed; *they* grew more corrupt or they became less tractable. However, the more historically accurate view is that whenever Washington lends support to foreign leaders, it signals to them how

important they are to us. Some might genuinely want our assistance. But all also understand that the more assistance they receive, the more value they can wring from the relationship. Most leaders are extraordinarily shrewd to begin with, otherwise they would not be where they are. Thus, it should not be surprising that they recognize exactly where their leverage really lies: usually in *not* doing quite what we want. This we wind up in often tense and rarely honest relationships.[44]

Whether the U.S. has become a less dependable ally over time is debatable, but other countries like Russia and China have certainly worked hard to make themselves *seem* more reliable. They have done so, in part, by demonstrating no interest in our version of human rights. They have likewise managed to jettison the most problematic portions of their authoritarian pasts, leaving them with a much shorter track record to be judged by, which is not to say that either country is honest in its dealings.[45] But without our baggage or our penchant to proselytize, neither one can be hoisted on our same petards.

Ultimately, it is this disjuncture between what we preach and who we support, that undercuts how we are perceived. We expend considerable effort on assisting other countries. In fact, deployed soldiers often wonder why gratitude seldom lasts long. Alas, one reason it is often short-lived is because we Americans rarely look at ourselves through others' eyes. We are quick to agree in this country that we do not like hypocrites. But, in our view, that is not how we behave overseas – instead, we try to be helpful; even when we are looking out for our own interests, we still strive to do good. Of course, the catch comes with *having* interests; interests belie altruism. Worse, given the discrepancies between what we Americans say the U.S. stands for – justice and human rights; what we preach – rectitude; and how we then behave – according to whichever of our interests seem most pressing at the time, we set ourselves up to appear duplicitous. We look especially duplicitous when we do business with warlords, corrupt politicians, dictators, and the like.

Or to re-phrase this: when Washington invokes principles but then behaves in unprincipled ways it subverts itself.[46] Beyond just shredding America's credibility, legitimacy, and moral authority, hypocrisy calls into question our being thought worthy of primacy, even by ourselves.[47]

[1] Lionel Tiger & Robin Fox, *The Imperial Animal* (Transaction Publishers, 1998 [1971]), p. 44.

[2] Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power, Volume 4: Globalizations, 1945-2011* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 432.

[3] Or, why not use them in a disposable way – as, say, human shields.

[4] We sometimes consider leaders to be irredeemable – e.g. Hitler, Saddam Hussein – but 'the people' never are. Instead, they might be dupes. Most often they are victims – of oppression, repression, misinformation, and so on.

[5] Or, as the U.S. director of national intelligence recently wrote, "The intelligence is clear: Beijing intends to dominate the U.S. and the rest of the planet economically, militarily and technologically. Many of China's major public initiatives and prominent companies offer only a layer of camouflage to the activities of the Chinese Communist Party" (John Ratcliffe, "China is national security threat No. 1," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 4, 2020).

[6] For example, who exactly is funding Antifa – and to what ends? Or, what about those pre-COVID migrant caravans? For more on weaponized migration, see Nathan Steger, "The weaponization of migration: examining migration as a 21st century tool of political warfare," NPS Masters thesis, December 2017.

[7] To better understand how political scientists think about status (and honor), I have drawn on: Elliot Abrams, ed., *Honor Among Nations: Intangible Interests and Foreign Policy* (Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1998); Stephen Rosen, *War and Human Nature* (Princeton University Press, 2005); Richard Lebow, "The past and future of war," *International Relations* 24 (3), 2010; Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

To better understand how political scientists think about primacy, I have drawn on: Robert Jervis, "International primacy: is the game worth the candle?" *International Security* 17 (4), 1993; Samuel Huntington, "Why international primacy matters," *International Security* 17 (4), 1993; Richard Betts, "The soft underbelly of American primacy: tactical advantages of terror," *Political Science Quarterly* 117 (1), 2002; Stephen Walt, "American primacy: its prospects and pitfalls," *Naval War College Review* LV (2), 2002; Stephen Brooks and William Wolhforth, "American primacy in perspective," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2002; Bradley Thayer, "In defense of primacy," *The National Interest*, November/December 2006; Aaron Friedberg "Preserving American primacy," Long Term Strategy Project/CSBA, January 2006; Deborah Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, "Status seekers: Chinese and Russian responses to American primacy," *International Security* 34 (4), 2010; Daniel Drezner, "Military primacy doesn't pay (nearly as much as you think), *International Security* 38 (1), 2013; Yuen Khong, "Primacy or world order? The United States and China's rise – a review essay," *International Security* 38 (3), 2013/14; Stephen Wertheim, "The price of primacy: why America shouldn't dominate the world," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020.

[8] Or to use what is a perfect, but now over-used modifier: prominence *weaponized*.

[9] To quote Bertrand Russell, "Power, like vanity, is insatiable. Nothing short of omnipotence could satisfy it completely. And as it is especially the vice of energetic men, the causal efficacy of love of power is out of all proportion to its frequency. It is, indeed, by far the strongest motive in the lives of important men" ("What desires are politically important?" Nobel Lecture, December 11, 1950).

[10] On our inexplicable shortsightedness, consider these two very different examples that both feature China: first, "The principal external threat the United States faces today is an aggressive and revisionist China – *the only challenger that could potentially undermine the American way of life*" (Kori Schake, Jim Mattis, Jim Ellis, and Joe Felter, "Defense in depth: why U.S. security depends on alliances – now more than ever," Foreign Affairs online, November 23, 2020), emphasis mine. Second, "… China has neither the ability to defeat the U.S. militarily in a war and thereby extinguish the U.S. political system, nor the capacity to eviscerate or impoverish the democratic world via the supposed control it will exercise over the global economic system, or as a result of the supposedly irresistible attraction of its system as a model for others" (Michael Swaine, "How Joe Biden can recalibrate US China policy," https://quincyinst.org/2020/11/09/how-goe-biden-can-recalibrate-us-china-policy/).

[11] For a complementary set of images about hollowing us out: "'The idea of the West is still there, but it's on life support… And it's in part because it's been stressed from within these democracies. *Termites* – the angry populist forces on both the right and the left that are deeply illiberal – have been chipping away at open societies from within,'" (Yaroslav Trofimov is quoting Brian Katulis in "Can the West still lead?" *The Wall Street Journal*, November 7-8, 2020), emphasis mine.

[12] For instance: Grenada, Panama, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo in the 1990s. And then, there was where we didn't intercede: Rwanda and Darfur.

Or as one prominent sociologist put it in 2013, "The United States does not now bring order to the world. The evidence of the last decade points to the opposite conclusion: the United States tilts the balance toward disorder – at least this is the case in the Middle East, and also in a different way in Mexico and Colombia, riven by bloody drug wars caused by Americans' demand for drugs. But it is difficult for Americans to accept this" (Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power,* p. 316).

For an especially blistering critique, nothing I have seen surpasses the following Letter to the Editor (*Wall Street Journal*, November 28-29, 2020), submitted by Doug Thomas (an American), and thus worth citing in full:

> "America was never the pillar of idealism. 'Pax Americana,' the fairy tale of peace and prosperity that supposedly blanketed the world after 1945, is entirely wishful thinking. Ask all the folks in Poland, Romania, Albania and Hungary who were sold out at Yalta and who after encouragement to revolt and promises of our support were misled and abandoned. What really followed World War II was global chaos including revolutions and civil wars, a Cold War, hot wars in Korea and Vietnam and brutal coups. We overthrew numerous democratic governments and routinely interfered in other nations' free elections. There were awful race riots here in the U.S., genocides in Rwanda and Cambodia and most recently Syria, and I could go on.
>
> "It's simply amazing that anyone could look at the shameful way we behaved in places like Laos, Cambodia, Iran, Egypt, Guatemala and El Salvador, and suggest that somehow we built a 'rich legacy' of aspirational moral authority that made the world a better place. Such a view of our role in the world is naïve and misleading at best, fraudulent at worst."

[13] Jack Goody, *Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 1971).

[14] Pakistan most famously. Foreign Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto allegedly said, in response to the prospect of India acquiring the bomb, "We should have to eat grass and get one, or buy one, of our own."

[15] The security umbrella we provide surely makes a difference, but maybe not as big a difference as we have imagined.

[16] For a slightly different take on Japan's shift from military to economic primacy, see Huntington, "Why international primacy matters." Most interestingly, many of the methods that everyone decries China using today are exactly what Huntington describes Japan having used – in the 1980s.

[17] 'Cultural primacy' already animates countries' pursuit of geographical indications protections. For instance, labeling has become increasingly restrictive, so that only a certain country or region in that country is allowed to lay claim to heritage products such as parmesan cheese, feta cheese, cognac, Kashmir pashmina, etc. The term 'cultural appropriation' pushes this even further as it seeks to to delimit who can benefit or lay claim to what.

[18] To follow through with the Japanese example (which is really only an ideal type example), the Japanese circa WWII were much more culturally conditioned to respect hierarchy than we were (or are). Concomitantly, they were also better able to accept their shortcomings. Here is where having an Emperor helped. Or, to further 'ideal type' Japan's immediate post-war pivot: 'we Japanese must be #1; should we fail at becoming #1, that means we are not as worthy *as* the #1 power, and whoever attains that status is owed our respect.'

[19] Larson and Shevchenko use Situational Identity Theory (SIT) to promote the idea of 'social creativity.' As they put it, "Status is a positional good, meaning that one group's status can improve only if another's declines. SIT introduces an important modification to this prevailing zero-sum conception of status by pointing out that groups have multiple traits on which to be evaluated, so that comparisons among them need not be competitive" ("Status

seekers," p. 69). Although they Larson and Shevchenko go on to note that "SIT allows for the possibility that power transitions may be accompanied by social cooperation, whereby the hegemon and rising powers recognize the other's necessary but constructive role in global governance" (p. 95), they sidestep a hegemon's or rising power's *need* to *continue* to compete, let alone continue to compete for primacy.

[20] The quest for primacy is alive and well even in those who are most passionate about restraint and retrenchment. Here, for instance, is a passage from a Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft fundraising email featuring Andrew Bacevich: "This generation is ready to step up and demand a more peaceful future, one where the United States is #1 in eradicating disease, supporting class education, and building safe, modern infrastructure, rather than #1 in arms sales, military spending, and drone assassinations" ("Leave a legacy of peace," Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, November 30, 2020).

[21] Of course, what dominance means to people, to include what they want to do with it, also differs cross-culturally – another huge topic.

[22] As I have argued elsewhere, the depth of our misperception helps explain why we got (and continue to get) Islamists wrong, and do not recognize (or want to acknowledge) that they are engaging in a *moral* contest with us.

[23] By, for instance: creating economic dependencies, indebting others, offering others security, etc. Of course, it is not only China that does this. So does the EU. So does Turkey. So do we. See, for instance, John Perkins, *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2004) and John Perkins, *The Secret History of the American Empire: Economic Hit Men, Jackals, and the Truth about Global Corruption* (Dutton, 2007). Although – it is possible that the tales Perkins tells are tall tales designed to paint a picture of unscrupulous corporations working hand-in-glove with scheming government agencies.

[24] Most prominently: sanctions. But also, just being portrayed as 'occupiers' can be costly. Case in point: India in Kashmir.

[25] Numerous defense intellectuals make this point. It is a central theme in several recent books: Charles Cleveland, Benjamin Jensen, Susan Bryant, and Arnel David, *Military Strategy in the 21st Century: People, Connectivity, and Competition* (Cambria Press, 2018); Sean McFate, *The New Rules of War* (William Morrow, 2019); and most explicitly in David Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

[26] Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze and Disseminate.

[27] As described in a 2015 Naval Postgraduate School project on "Strategic Ambush."

[28] A second problem with the 'soft' targeting we prefer is that by distributing money and aid we fuel corruption and undermine the very institutions of state we say we want people to establish. Also, as will be explained below, it is not as though we have perfected our own systems or practices, and yet we extol them as though they are an ideal fit for others.

[29] Decisive in the sense of bringing about others' unequivocal submission.

[30] In addition to defense and denial, of course.

[31] One major exception to this: military assistance in the wake of a natural disaster.

[32] For instance, there are Afghans who still feel they, not we, were responsible for the demise of the Soviet Union.

[33] Another problem is that everyone uses 'China' as shorthand – but in doing so what are they really referring to: the country, the people, the CCP, or President Xi?

[34] There is far too much to cite. For older books, consider these titles: *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*; *The Contest of the Century: The New Era of Competition with China – And*

How America Can Win; *Cool War: The Future of Global Competition*; *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. Increasing numbers of titles explicitly invoke a new Cold War. For just a sampling: "Caught in 'ideological spiral,' U.S. and China drift toward Cold War" (The New York Times, July 14, 2020); "The United States forgot its strategy for winning Cold Wars: the plan that worked to defeat the Soviet Union can work today against China – it's just not what you think" (Foreign Policy online, May 5, 2020) "Cold War now or Hot War later" (https://quillette.com/2020/05/17/cold-war-now-or-ot-war-later/). Or there is the more common invocation of rivalry, for instance: "How America can stop its rivalry with China from spinning into war."

[35] On the topic of subversion, which is often subsumed under the term 'political warfare' (and is a term that I am not using in any doctrinal sense), I borrow from several earlier arguments I made in "How to Thwart Subversion and 'Death by a Thousand Doubts,'" Ajai Sahni (ed.), *The Fragility of Order: Essays in Honour of K.P.S. Gill*, Kautilya, 2019.

For better or worse, the literature on this topic is growing at a rapid pace. It would be comforting to think that as more new books and articles bring 'active measures' to light (e.g. Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret of Disinformation and Political Warfare* [Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2020]), readers will come away with the same reaction I have: in the not so distant past, 'active measures' required careful attention to detail, a long timeline, and significant effort. But little or none of this now seems necessary – provided the aim is to sow mayhem and mistrust.

Here is where my argument differs considerably from that made in pieces like "A measure short of war: the return of Great-Power subversion," by Jill Kastner and William Wohlforth (*Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2021). My contention is that subversion is a tool that precludes *having to go to war*.

[36] What should be especially sobering about what Usama bin Laden set in motion is that he and other Islamist extremists devoted most of their efforts to pitting True Believers against Infidels, eliminating apostates along the way; they did not focus single-mindedly on trying to divide us, though their successors certainly could.

[37] And this might not be ameliorated even once we are all vaccinated – since the long-term residual effects of the vaccines have yet to be determined and might not be known for quite some time. Think: simian virus 40.

[38] For instance, in an article about the 2008 lecture he delivered to a college audience, *Time* magazine's then-managing editor, Richard Stengel, was said to defy "the traditional notion that journalists should be unbiased. 'I didn't go to journalism school,' Stengel said. 'But this notion that journalism is objective, or must be objective is something that has always bothered me – because the notion about objectivity is in some ways a fantasy. I don't know that there is as such a thing as objectivity'" (https://www.mrc.org/articles/time-editor-defends-doctoring-iwo-jima-photo-calls-objective-journalism-fantasy). Or, consider the headline on Matt Taibbi's much cited August 6, 2015 piece in *The New York Times*, "'Objective journalism' is an illusion."

[39] Either non-Westerners were more culturally cautious or too constrained by conservative rulers to follow suit sufficiently quickly. Or, because they valued harmony over creative destruction, they were not about to copy the West. At least not until recently.

[40] Or, as Deloitte recently trumpeted in a full-page ad: "It's already tomorrow in Shanghai."

[41] "There's a world of difference between winning and making yourself feel better while losing. It's time for the U.S. to face up to the magnitude of the Chinese challenge and abandon some self-consoling myths – such as the tired notion that China steals technology because it can't innovate. China can innovate, and already it is ahead in 5G broadband, quantum cryptography and key applications of AI. Homegrown innovation, not intellectual property theft, should be America's biggest tech worry" (David Goldman, "What China learned from Cold War America," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 25-26, 2020).

[42] Airline manufacturing is significant because aircraft have long been one of the U.S.'s most lucrative exports.

[43] Or, the more fixated we are about progress in preferred fields (e.g. green energy, IT, medicine) vs. in all fields, to include fields that we find morally questionable but others do not, the better able near peers will be to capitalize on outstripping us. Or, the more problems they will unleash, like COVID.

[44] The same holds for many of our more long-standing partnerships, too: e.g. with Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and even Israel – which should underscore the broader point that the more we appear to need others, the more leverage over us we grant them.

[45] Moscow did this when Russia shed the USSR, and China when it turned the corner first with, and then after, Mao.

[46] Not only are non-Americans better able to recognize and reject hypocrisy today than at any time in the past, but the same is true for growing numbers of Americans. This is a topic that deserves its own book. Young people have always been judgmental and impatient. But they also used to defer and bite their tongues because society was more or less gerontocratic. We have recently undergone a historic (as in, first time ever) inversion in terms of how much authority and deference youth are accorded. This has under-examined impacts of all sorts.

[47] Because we Americans claim to be principled, hypocrisy is the greatest gift we can give anyone interested in our comeuppance – especially since there are at least three things smart adversaries can do to amplify how dishonest, untrustworthy, and venal we are, thereby riling domestic as well as foreign audiences. Adversaries can use false narratives and erroneous facts to misdirect and misinform; they can flood the zone, making it so difficult to discern the truth that citizens essentially give up; and/or they can plant doubts so deep that they change how people interpret everything they see and hear.

A surprising amount can be achieved through innuendo alone. Indeed, some of the very same effects that terrorists and insurgents hope to achieve through violence are even more easily accomplished by alluding to something secret going on. Because all governments can be made to appear more secretive than they are, if authorities are asked questions they can't answer, either because they have to protect 'sources and methods' or because they cannot publicly acknowledge they know the answers, they look complicit; their denials reinforce the notion that, of course, a cover-up is underway.

For some very suggestive examples of how easy it is to manipulate information and people, see: Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads* (Vintage Books, 2016) and Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: the Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (PublicAffairs, 2014).